

Reflection Paper

Subject: United States History

Grade: 8

Module 3: Instruction for Active Learning : Teacher implements instruction in order to engage students in rigorous and relevant learning and to promote their curiosity about the world at large by:

Selected Indicator: Using a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies to enable students to apply and construct new learning.

Goal:

I will investigate and implement new evidence based instructional strategies so I am better able to engage my students with increased opportunities to construct and apply the higher level skills of evaluation, analysis and creation when presented with new learning.

Initial Summary:

My classroom instruction is often based upon engaging students in learning and applying lower skills. The focus of my instruction needs to evolve so that I present my students with more opportunities for analyzing, evaluating and creating when presented with new learning.

I will investigate and implement new evidence based instructional strategies so I am better able to engage my students with increased opportunities to construct and apply the higher level skills of evaluation, analysis and creation when presented with new learning.

Specifically I will look to teach these new strategies so that my students will be better able to analyze and evaluate primary source documents related to the 8th Grade United States History Common Assessment and create a higher quality "Letter to the Editor" than my students did last year.

Reflection:

I met with my TEAM Mentor and Common Core Coach and discussed various opportunities for growth in knowledge, practice and implementation in the area of classroom instruction. We discussed areas of curriculum in which further investigation and changes in practice would help my students and have the greatest impact on student learning.

Each year our school district requires eighth grade students to complete a common assessment in social studies. The common assessment is based upon primary source documents from the Road to Revolution section of our curriculum. Students are presented with excerpts from ten primary

source documents. Last year I distributed the documents to the students in the form of a packet. Last year results from my students were personally disappointing as students with a higher reading level pushed ahead before students at lower reading levels were able to complete the assigned document. The common assessment culminates in the form of a letter to the editor of a colonial era newspaper. Each student has to choose to write from the patriot or the loyalist perspective and convince the fence-sitters to join their cause.

I chose to work on three aspects of the common assessment, the manner in which students are presented with certain documents; student collaboration on the document portion of the assessment; and the manner in which students put together the draft copy of their final letter to the editor. I also chose to investigate integrating the common assessment with Common Core Standards and the requirements to teach key ideas in reading and writing.

One of the documents that my students work with consists of a written description of the Boston Massacre and the famous etching by Paul Revere. The challenge that I faced last year with this document was that students were drawn directly to the visual of the etching on the page, even with the short one paragraph written description being at the top of the page. After discussion with my Mentor and our Common Core Coach and reading from Laura Robb's book, *Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science and Math*, that the purpose of visualizing is to show students connections which lead to greater understanding, I decided to break the two apart.

First I gave the students a standard piece of paper presented horizontally with the description of the Boston Massacre at the top of the page. I instructed the students that artistic ability did not count for this lesson, however accuracy in portraying what was described did count. I then gave them time to draw and when the class was finished, I showed them Paul Revere's etching on the smart board. I asked them to describe the different between the picture that they drew and the one that Paul Revere did. Most all students in the class immediately understood the difference between the written description and the etching as they had created their drawing based upon the written account. Students then found it very easy to answer the question presented in the document, "How does the written account of the Boston Massacre differ from Paul Revere's etching?" Laura Robb assertion was confirmed in as the outcome was very different than the short inaccurate answers that were the norm last year. Almost all students were able to see, understand and articulate the difference between the etching and the description. As students worked on their answers, I observed almost everyone comparing the written description to the Revere etching as they answered the question on the document.

The remaining documents in the Common Assessment all deal with excerpts from various pre-revolutionary primary sources documents. One of the documents is an excerpt from Thomas Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*. Last year I instructed my students with a packet of all ten documents and went through the documents as a class, in the sage on the stage format and students really did not learn a great deal from this method of teaching. The responses that I received to the questions were very general and understanding was weak.

After discussing my results from last year with our Common Core Coach, I separated students into pairs based upon reading ability, pairing someone with a stronger reading ability with a student that has a weaker reading ability. In Laura Robb's, *Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science and Math*, she discusses various strategies and I decided that I would use a variation of the Collaborative Strategic Reading Strategy. This strategy call for the pairing of students and having each pair read and discuss the passage before individually writing a response to questions related to the

passage.

I helped students with the difficult vocabulary in this document by posting chart paper with vocabulary on the walls. I explained to my students that Thomas Paine was famous because he wrote pamphlets that common people of the time, most of which had an eighth grade education, could understand. I gave each pair fifteen minutes to read and discuss the selection. The question that is posed at the end of this document is, "Explain why Thomas Paine calls monarchy an "unwise, unfair, and unnatural agreement." As this is an assessment, I then asked for each student to write a paragraph that answered the question. The scoring results on the document were very much improved over last year as all but 4 of my 85 students scored either a 9 or 10 out of 10 on this document. Last year, most scores were 7 or below with very few 9's and no 10's. Instead of students answering the question in a general way like last year, students divided the question into three parts, (unwise, unfair and unnatural) and then used textual evidence to answer all three parts. The growth that occurred because of collaboration here was tremendous and the depth of understanding increased dramatically.

My experience last year with the writing component of the Common Assessment was that it developed into a huge hurdle for many students as they saw it as too large a task and did not like being required to write it out in pencil, completely erase areas that need to be substantially corrected and rewrite the entire letter if the mistake that they made was in the third, fourth or concluding paragraphs as was the practice.

Robert Marzano's claim in Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement, that teachers should reward based on standards of performance, I developed a five page graphic organizer to use in developing the draft. In creating this graphic organizer, I kept in mind that I would be able to see each student's work five times during his or her writing and allow for me to have five opportunities to encourage students as each successfully completed the various pieces of the letter to the editor.

I headed the first page with an, "if, then and because," framework for a thesis statement leaving ample room for students to add brief supporting arguments. The first page also gave several lines on which the student would write the introduction paragraph. The second, third and fourth pages left an area at the top to write the first, second and third arguments that the student used to support his or her thesis. The fifth page gave the student room to develop his or her concluding paragraph. I included a place for my initials at the bottom of each of the pages and as the students finished the paragraph reviewed their work with them and then they were able to move on to the next page/paragraph. In instances where the student did not stay focused on the argument of the paragraph listed at the top of the page, we conferenced on what needed to be improved or changed and I was able to give the student a new page for his or her graphic organizer cutting down on the amount of rewriting necessary to complete the letter.

Improvements in student work showed in the ability of the student to break down the work to its smallest form providing several opportunities for feedback so that the ability of each student at this type of writing improved greatly. Student complaints about rewrites were significantly less, they understood the importance of producing a good final product and students that had to do a rewrite just asked for another sheet and the staple remover instead of complaining and feeling like they had to do unnecessary work as in the past. I was also able to spend more time on important facets of writing such as topic sentences, hooks, tone, content and transitions. I was also able to have students concentrate more on supporting

each individual argument as they were made completely one paragraph at a time.

Working with my Mentor, Common Core Coach, Literacy Specialist and exploring various books and articles during the instruction module has encouraged me to continue to analyze each unit, section and lesson that I teach my students with an eye toward ways to improve instruction and learning. I feel compelled to always reflect upon teaching methods that I utilize so that I may improve as an educator and my students get the lessons that I have created for the given unit that I am teaching using new research based strategies whenever possible.